GUNNER DEPEW

By

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LEGIONARIES VOW VENGEANCE WHEN GERMANS HIDE BEHIND BELGIAN WOMEN AND CHILDREN.

Synopsis.—Albert N. Depew, author of the story, tells of his service in the United States navy, during which he attained the rank of chief petty officer, first-class gunner. The world war starts soon after he receives his honorable discharge from the navy, and he leaves for France with a determination to enlist. He joins the Foreign Legion and is assigned to the dreadnaught Cassard, where his marksmanship wins him high honors. Later he is transferred to the land forces and sent to the Flanders front. He gets his first experience in a front line trench at Dixmude.

CHAPTER V—Continued.

—4—

I never saw a battery better concealed than this one. Up on the ground you couldn't see the muzzle twenty yards away—and that was all there was to see at any distance. There was a ruined garden just outside the gun quarters, and while the gunners were there picking apples there would be a hiss and an explosion, and over would go some of the trees, or maybe a man or two, but never a shell struck nearer the guns than that. The poilus used to thank Fritz for helping them pick the apples, because the explosions would bring them down in great style. Shells from our heavy artillery passed just over the garden, too, making an awful racket. But they were not in it with the "75's."

They gave me a little practice with a "75" under the direction of expert French gunners before I went to my 14-inch naval gun, and, believe me, it was a fine little piece. Just picture to yourself a little beauty that can send a 38-pound shell every two seconds for five miles and more, if you want it to, and land on Fritz' vest button every time. There is nothing I like better than a gun, anyway, and I have never since been entirely satisfied with anything less than a "75."

As you probably know, the opposing artillery in this war is so widely separated that the gunners never see their targets unless these happen to be buildings, and even then it is rare. So, since an artillery officer never sees the enemy artillery or infantry, he must depend on others to give him the range and direction.

For this purpose there are balloons and airplanes attached to each artillery unit. The airplanes are equipped with wireless, but also signal by smoke and direction of flight, while the balloons use telephones. The observers have maps and powerful glasses and cameras. Their maps are marked off in zones to correspond with the maps used by the artillery officers.

The observations are signaled to a receiving station on the ground and are then telephoned to the batteries. All our troops were equipped with telephone signal corps detachments and this was a very important arm of the service. The enemy position is shelled before an attack, either en barrage or otherwise, and communication between the waves of attack and the artillery is absolutely necessary. Bombardments are directed toward certain parts of the enemy position almost as accurately as you would use a searchlight. The field telephones are very light and are portable to the last degree. They can be rigged up or knocked down in a very short time. The wire is wound on drums or reels drawn back and forth on the track by little Belgian engines.

A Regular Hail of Shrapnel Fell.

and you would be surprised to see how quickly our corps established communication from a newly won trench to headquarters, for instance. They were asking for our casualties before we had finished having them, almost.

Artillery fire was directed by men whose duty it was to dope out the range from the information sent them by the observers in the air. Two men were stationed at the switchboard, one man to receive the message and the other to operate the board. As soon as the range was plotted out it was telephoned to the gunners and they did the rest.

The naval guns at Dixmude were mounted on flat cars and these were

After I had been at my gun for several days I was ordered back to my regiment, which was again in the front-line trenches. My course was past both the British and French lines but quite a distance behind the front lines.

Everywhere there were ambulances and wagons going backward and forward. I met one French ambulance that was a long wagon full of poilus from a field hospital near the firing line and was driven by a man whose left arm was bandaged to the shoulder. Two poilus who sat in the rear on guard had each been wounded in the leg and one had had a big strip of his scalp torn off. There was not a sound man in the bunch. You can imagine what their cargo was like, if the convoy was as used up as these chaps. But all who could were singing and talking and full of pep. That is the French for you: they used no more men than they could possibly spare to take care of the wounded, but they were all cheerful about it—always.

Just after I passed this ambulance the Germans began shelling a section of the road too near me to be comfortable, so I beat it to a shell crater about twenty yards off the road, to the rear. A shrapnel shell exploded pretty near me just as I jumped into this hole—I did not look around to see how close it was—and I remember now how the old minstrel joke I had heard on board ship came to my mind at the time—something about a fellow feeling so small he climbed into a hole and pulled it after him—and I wished I might do the same. I flattened myself as close against the wall of the crater as I could and then I noticed that somebody had made a dugout in the other wall of the crater and I started for it.

The shells were exploding so fast by that time that you could not listen for each explosion separately, and just as I jumped into the dugout a regular hail of shrapnel fell on the spot I had just passed. It was pretty dark in the dugout and the first move I made I bumped into somebody else and he let out a yell that you could have heard a mile. It was a Tommy who had been wounded in the hand and between curses he told me I had sat right on his wound when I moved. I asked him why he did not yell sooner, but he only swore more. He surely was a great cusser.

The bombardment slackened up a bit about this time, and I thought I would have a look around. I did not get out of the crater entirely, but moved around out of the dugout until I could see the road I had been on. The first thing I saw was a broken-down wagon that had just been hit—in fact, it was toppling over when my eye caught it. The driver jumped from his seat and while he was in the air his head was torn completely from his shoulders by another shell—I do not know what kind. This was enough for me, so back to the dugout.

How the Germans did it I do not know, but they had found out about that road and opened fire at exactly the moment when the road was covered with wagons and men. Yet there had not been a balloon or airplane in the sky for some time.

After a while the bombardment moved away to the east, from which direction I had come, and I knew our batteries were getting it. The Tommy and I came out of the dugout. As I started climbing up the muddy sides I saw there was a man standing at the edge of it, and I could tell by his puttees that he was a Limey. I was having a hard job of it, so without looking up I hailed him.

"That was sure some shelling, wasn't it?" I said. "There's a lad down here with a wounded fin; better give him a hand."

"What shelling do you mean," says the legs, without moving. "There's been none in this sector for some time, I think."

The Tommy was right at my heel by this time, and he let out a string of language. I was surprised, too, and still scrambling around in the mud.

Then the Tommy let a "Gawd 'elp us!" and I looked up and saw that the legs belonged to a Limey officer, a major, I think. And here we had been cussing the eyes off of him!

But he sized it up rightly and gave us a hand, and only laughed when we tried to explain. I got rattled and told him that all I saw was his legs and that they did not look like an officer's legs, which might have made it worse, only he was good-natured about it. Then he said that he had been asleep in a battalion headquarters dugout, about a hundred yards away, and only waked up when part of the roof caved in on him. Yet he did not know he had been shelled!

I went on down the road a stretch, but soon found it was easier walking beside it, because the Huns had shelled it neatly right up and down the middle. Also, there were so many wrecked horses and wagons to climb over on the road—besides dead men.

After I had passed the area of the bombardment and got back on the road I sat down to rest and smoke. A couple of shells had burst so near the crater that they had thrown the dirt right into the dugout, and I was a little dizzy from the shock. While I was sitting there a squad of Tommies came up with about twice their number of German prisoners. The Tommies had been making Fritz do the goose step and they started them at it again when they saw me sitting there. It sure is good for a laugh any time, this goose step. I guess they call it that after the fellow who invented it.

One thing I had noticed about Fritz was the way his coat flared out at the bottom, so I took this chance to find out about it, while they halted for a rest just a little farther down the road. I found that they carried their emergency kits in their coats. These kits contained canned meat, tobacco, needles, thread and plaster—all this in addition to their regular pack.

Then I drilled down the road some more, but had to stop pretty soon to let a column of French infantry swing on to the road from a field. They were on their way to the trenches as re-enforcements. After every two companies there would be a wagon. Pretty soon I saw the uniform of the Legion. Then a company of my regiment came up and I wheeled in with them. We were in the rear of the column that had passed. Our boys were going up for their regular stunt in the front lines, while the others had just arrived at that part of the front.

Then for the first time my feet began hurting me. Our boots were made of rough cowhide and fitted very well, but it was a day's labor to carry them on your feet. I began lagging, and I would lag twenty or thirty yards behind and then try to catch up. But the thousands of men ahead of me kept up the steady pace and very few limped, though they had been on the march since 3 a. m. It was then about 11 a. m. Those who did limp were carried in the wagons. But I had seen very few men besides the drivers riding in the wagons, and I wanted to be as tough as the next guy, so I kept on. But, believe me, I was sure glad when we halted for a rest along the road.

That is, the re-enforcements did! Our company of the Legion had not come from so far, and when the front of the column had drawn out of the way along the road we kept on filing, as the saying is. I did not care about being tough then, and I was ready for the wagon.

Only now there were no wagons! They belonged with the other troops. So I had to ease along as best I could for what seemed like hours—to my feet—until we turned off onto another road and halted for a rest. I found out later that our officers had gone astray and were lost at this time, though, of course, they did not tell us so.

We arrived at our section of the trench about three o'clock that afternoon and I rejoined my company. I was all tired out after this trek and found myself longing for the Cassard and the rolling wave, where no Marathons and five-mile hikes were necessary. But this was not in store for me—yet.

CHAPTER VI.

Fritz Does a Little "Strafeing."

My outfit was one of those that saw the Germans place women and children in front of them as shields against our fire. More than a third of our men, I should say, had been pretty tough criminals in their own countries. They always traded their pay against a handful of cards or a roll of the bones whenever they got a chance. They had been in most of the dirty parts of the world. This war was not such a much to them; just one more job in the list. They could call God and the saints and the human body more things than any boss stevedore that ever lived.

Yet they were religious in a way. Some of them were always reading religious books or saying prayers in different ways and between them they believed in every religion and superstition under the sun, I guess. Yet they were the toughest bunch I ever saw.

After they saw the Germans using the Belgian women the way they did, almost every man in my company took some kind of a vow or other, and most of them kept their vows, too, I believe. And those that were religious got more so after that.

Our chaplain had always been very friendly with the men, and while I think they liked him they were so tough they would never admit it, and some of them claimed he was a Jonah, or jinx, or bad luck of some kind. But they all told him their vows as soon as they made them and he was supposed to be a sort of referee as to whether they kept them or not.

During my second stunt in the front lines things got pretty bad. The Germans were five to our one and they kept pushing back parts of the line and cleaning out others. And the weather was as bad as it could be and the food did not always come regularly. Now, before they took their vows, every last man in the bunch would have been kicking and growling all the time, but, as it was, the only time they growled was when the Germans pushed us back.

Things kept getting worse and you could see that the men talked to the chaplain more and quite a few of them got real chummy with him.

One morning Fritz started in bright and early to begin his strafe. The lieutenant was walking up and down the trench to see that the sentries

How We Give 'Em the Butt.

were properly posted and were on the job. A shell whizzed over his head and landed just behind the parapet and the dirt spouted up like I imagine a Yellowstone geyser looks.

Another officer came up to the lieutenant—a new one who had only joined the company about a week before. They had walked about ten yards when another shell whizzed over them. They laid to and a third one came. There were three in less than five minutes, directly over their heads.

Then a shell landed on the left side of the trench and a poilu yelled that four men had got it. They were all wounded and three died later. The lieutenant went over to them and just after he passed me a lad got it square not far from me and was knocked over to where I was lying.

The lieutenant came back and helped me with the first-aid roll and then the Germans began using shrapnel. The lieutenant was swearing hard about the shrapnel and the Germans and everything else.

Farther to the right a shell had just struck near the parados and made a big crater and across from it, against the parapet, was a young chap with a deep gash in his head, sitting on the fire step and next to him a fellow nursing the place where his arm had been blown off. Our bread ration lay all about the trench and some of the poilus were fishing it out of the mud and water and wiping the biscuits off on their sleeves or eating as fast as they could. Only some of the biscuits had fallen in bloody water and they did not eat these.

A young fellow, hardly more than a boy, stumbled over the parados and fell into the trench right near the lieutenant and the lieutenant dressed his wounds himself. I think he was some relation of the boy.

The lieutenant asked him how he felt, but the boy only asked for water and smiled. But you could see he was in great pain. Then the boy said: "Oh, the pain is awful. I am going to die."

"You are all right, old man," the lieutenant said. "You will be home soon. The stretcher bearers are coming." So we passed the word for the stretcher bearers.

Then he took the water bottle from the boy's side and sat him up and gave him some water. He left the water bottle with the chap and went to hurry the stretcher bearers along. When he got around the corner of the trench the boy was slipping back and the water bottle had fallen down. So I went over to him and propped him up again and gave him some more water.

Depew goes "over the top" and "gets" his first German in a bayonet fight. Read his story of this exploit in the next installment.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Especially in the Parlor.

"Where there is so much smoke in the house there is bound to be a good deal of ire," observed the almost cynic as he bit down on a wartime butter bean, causing his new false teeth to list heavily to port.

How It Is.

"And what are these poor fellows doing?" asked the would-be social worker who was being shown through the prison by an attendant.

"Oh, they are making a break for liberty," answered the guard.

"Why, they seem perfectly docile, sitting around with their hammers and cracking rocks. How can you say they are breaking for liberty?"

"Well, you see, ma'am, they know they gotta break these stones up or we won't let 'em out."

At Current Rates.

"Is she very rich?"

"She must be. She takes a glass of milk at every meal."

A man can make his wife believe almost anything during their courtship.

Something Lacking.

"Nobody seems to object to prohibition," said the visitor at Crimson Gulch.

"Well," replied Broncho Bob, "Three-Finger Sam is right resentful. He's gettin' to feel lonesome an' neglected. It's been near six months now since anyone come around givin' him heart-to-heart talks an' tellin' him what a great man he'd be if he'd let liquor alone."